

Guinea-Bissau

Like most sub-Saharan nations, Guinea-Bissau is an arbitrary European construct, yet it possesses two qualities that make this small country stand out from its neighbours. First and foremost are the people themselves. You'll almost never hear the disingenuous '*bonjour, mon ami*' that signals the beginning of an unwelcome sales pitch. If you're arriving from, say, Dakar, you'll be relieved to find helpful gestures are almost always just that – expressions of kindness rather than a means to extract cash. The country's other big draw? The remarkable Arquipélago dos Bijagós. These delta islands are lined with powdery, white-sand beaches, washed by azure waters, and populated by a people whose matriarchal culture, long protected by hidden sandbanks and treacherous tides, is unlike any found in West Africa.

The mainland, by contrast, provides a fine recapitulation of West Africa's attractions, including mangrove-lined rivers, a gorgeous beach at Varela and rainforests in the south – home to elephants and chimpanzees.

Always poor, the country's economy and infrastructure were severely damaged by civil war in the late 1990s. Transport and communications remain trying, and hotels and food – especially in the capital – are no bargain. However, national reconciliation seems to have arrived with peaceful elections in 2005, and there's cautious optimism about the future.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 36,120 sq km
- **ATMs** There are none; come with cash or travellers cheques
- **Borders** Guinea (Kandika open); Senegal (Salikénié and Pirada open, São Domingos sometimes closed – check ahead)
- **Budget** From US\$30 per day
- **Capital** Bissau
- **Languages** Portuguese, Crioulo
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA498
- **Population** 1.416 million
- **Seasons** Dry and mild (late November – February), hot and humid (March – May & November), hot and rainy (June – October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 245; international access code 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visa** Single entry valid for 45 days costs US\$60. Required for all visitors except citizens of Economic Community of West Africa States (Ecowas) nations. Available upon arrival at Bissau airport. Otherwise, arrange before arrival.



HIGHLIGHTS

- **João Vieira** – **Poilão National Marine Park** (p377) Discover the island's powdery sand beaches and disarmingly friendly people.
- **Ilha de Orango** (p377) Stalk rare, salt-water hippos after visiting the tombs of Bijagós kings and queens.
- **Varela** (p378) Laze on the gorgeous but undeveloped beaches just over the border from Senegal's Cap Skirring.
- **Sacred Forests** (p378) Disappear into the dense jungle around Catió and Jemberem – the westernmost habitat of the African chimpanzee.
- **Bissau** (p374) Sip your way through blackouts at the capital's amiable cafés.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The rainy season is from June to October. Conditions are especially humid in the months before the rains (April and May), when average maximum daytime temperatures rise to 34°C. Daily maximums rarely fall below 30°C.

The best time to visit is from late November to February, when conditions are dry and relatively cool.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Spend a day or two in the relaxing capital Bissau (p374), before heading to Ilha de Bubaque in the Arquipélago dos Bijagós (p376).

HOW MUCH?

- **Small souvenir mask** US\$4
- **Shared taxi ride in Bissau** US\$0.50
- **Nescafé** US\$0.20
- **Woven indigo cotton cloth (40cm x 80cm)** US\$6
- **Main course in Western-style restaurant** US\$8

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.20
- **1L bottled water** US\$1
- **Bottle of Portuguese beer** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$5
- **Omelette sandwich from street vendor** US\$1

WARNING

Peaceful presidential elections in 2005 have raised hopes of lasting stability following the 1998 civil war. However, underlying tensions remain, so be sure to check the latest situation before arrival. Note that the region around São Domingos and along the Senegalese border is particularly prone to instability.

There are still land mines in some rural and remote areas. If travelling far off-the-beaten path, research your route and consider bringing a trusted guide.

- **Two Weeks** During a second week, consider further explorations of the Bijagós. Head to Orango (p377), with its rare, saltwater hippos, and then check out one of the remoter but paradisiacal islands, like Ilha João Vieira (p377).
- **Three Weeks** Devote a third week to exploring the rich mainland ecosystems in-depth, such as mangrove swamps of the Parque Natural dos Tarrafes do Rio Cacheu (p377) in the north or the sacred Parque Natural de Cantanhez (p378) in the south.

HISTORY

The great Sahel Empire of Mali, which flourished between the 13th and 15th centuries AD, included parts of present-day Guinea-Bissau. For more information on the precolonial history of this part of West Africa, see p392.

European Arrival & Colonisation

Portuguese navigators first reached what is now Guinea-Bissau around 1450. They found navigable rivers that facilitated trade with the interior, and were soon extracting gold, ivory, pepper and especially slaves.

For centuries the Portuguese presence was limited to coastal trading stations, but with the end of the slave trade in the 19th century, the Portuguese had to win control of the interior to continue to extract wealth. To do so, they allied themselves with Muslim ethnicities, including the Fula and Mandinko, to subdue animist tribes. When right-wing dictator António Salazar came to power in Portugal in 1926, he imposed direct Portuguese rule, forcing peasants to plant groundnuts (peanuts) for export, like it or not.

War of Liberation

By the early 1960s African colonies were rapidly winning independence, but Salazar refused to relinquish those under his control. The result: one of Africa's longest, bloodiest wars of liberation.

The father of independence was Amílcar Cabral, who in 1956 helped found the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC). In 1961 the PAIGC started arming and mobilising peasants, and controlled half the country within five years. The PAIGC built schools, provided medical services and encouraged widespread political participation. Cabral was assassinated in 1973, but freedom was inevitable. When Salazar's regime fell in 1974, the new Portuguese government quickly recognised the fledgling nation.

Independence

Once in power, the PAIGC government faced staggering problems. Only one in 20 people could read, life expectancy was 35 years, 45% of children died before the age of five and rice production had fallen by 71%. The new socialist state made significant inroads, especially relative to other postcolonial countries. Nevertheless a coup in 1986 forced President João Vieira to abandon socialism and sell off state enterprises.

Meanwhile intractable poverty as well as growing corruption under Vieira culminated in national strikes in 1997, which quickly devolved into a civil war. Vieira was forced to

flee the capital in 1999. Remarkably, military commanders handed power back to civilians. Nevertheless, several subsequent coups kept the war-weary country on edge, and separatist conflict in southern Senegal frequently spilled over Guinea-Bissau's northern border.

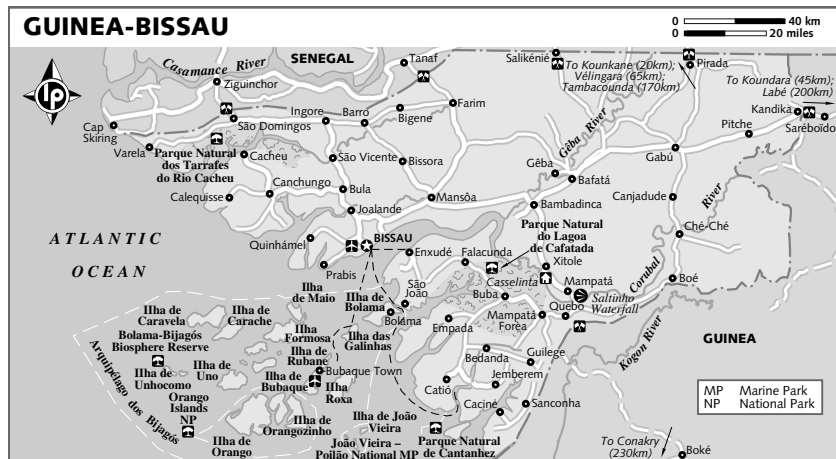
Guinea-Bissau Today

Despite fears of continued factional violence, the 2005 presidential elections were deemed largely free and fair. The winner? Deposed president João Vieira, who returned from exile to run a successful campaign based on national reconciliation. While fundamental problems of corruption and poverty could yet destabilise the current peace, Guinea-Bissau nationals generally express cautious optimism about their country's future.

CULTURE

Despite wide religious and ethnic differences, Guinea-Bissau nationals are united by a neighbourly goodwill that is genuinely remarkable. Even in the capital city, violence and even aggressive salesmanship are rare. Mainland ethnic cultures are similar to those in neighbouring Senegal and Guinea. However, the Bijagós people have very distinct customs (see *Queens of the Bijagós*, p377).

While Guinea-Bissau is one of the world's poorest countries, regular rains and relatively fertile land make outright hunger rare. Most people scratch out a living from fishing and subsistence farming. Villages consist of mud-brick houses roofed with thatched grasses.



Except for a lucky few, life is hardly easier in cities and towns. In a nation with virtually no industry, most people eke out a living as small-time merchants.

PEOPLE

Current estimates put the population at about 1.4 million, divided among some 23 ethnic groups. The two largest are the Balante (30%) in the coastal and southern regions and the Fula (20%) in the north. Other groups include the Manjaco (or Manjak), Papel, Fulup and Mandingo (Mandinka). The offshore islands are mostly inhabited by the Bijagós people (see p377).

About 45% of the people (mainly Fula and Mandingo) are Muslims. Christians make up less than 10% of the population, mostly around Bissau. Animist beliefs remain strong along the coast and in the south.

ARTS

Guinea-Bissau has a modest tradition of sculpted figures and masks, similar to other countries of the region. The Bijagós people, on the other hand, have evolved a more distinctive style.

On the mainland, dance and music are largely influenced by the Mandingo and Diola people of neighbouring Senegal. The harp-like *kora* and the xylophone-like *balafon* are common. The traditional Guinean beat is *gumbé*. Modern music shares the same roots, though the Portuguese colonial legacy has given it a Latin edge.

ENVIRONMENT

Guinea-Bissau has an area of just over 36,000 sq km (about the size of Switzerland). Coastal areas are flat, and feature estuaries, mangrove swamps and patches of forest. The landscape continues to remain flat as you move inland but grows drier as it transitions into the Sahel.

Guinea-Bissau's rivers shelter fresh-water hippos, while the Bijagós have a few salt-water examples. The Bijagós are also an important nesting ground for aquatic turtles. The rain-forests of the southeast are the most westerly home of Africa's chimpanzee population. The coastal wetlands harbour a stunning variety of birds, including parrots, cranes and peregrine falcons.

The natural vegetation of the inland areas is lightly wooded savanna, though much is

under cultivation. Mangrove swamps dominate the coast.

Environmental issues include rapid loss of mangroves to rice plantations. Extensive groundnut production has leached nutrients and promoted erosion, and over-fishing in rich coastal waters is a growing concern.

Guinea-Bissau has a number of protected areas, including the Bolama-Bijagós Biosphere Reserve, which contains Orango Islands National Park (p377) and João Vieira-Poilão National Marine Park (p377). On the mainland, the Parque Natural dos Tarrafes do Rio Cacheu (p377), near the border with Senegal, encompasses impressive mangroves. Near Buba, the Parque Natural de Lagoa de Cafatada (p378) protects rich freshwater wetlands. And Parque Natural de Cantanhez (p3678) is planned to protect estuarine mangroves and several sacred forests.

For more information, contact **IBAP** (☎ 207106; Rua São Tomé), the institute that oversees all the parks from Bissau.

FOOD & DRINK

Seafood is the highlight of Guinean cuisine, including shrimp, oysters and meaty *bica* (sea bream), served grilled or sautéed with onions and limes. Rice is supplemented by yams, beans and *mandioca* (cassava). Vegetables generally include okra, carrots and squash. Palm oil is another key staple.

Canned soft drinks, bottled water and beer are widely available. Local brews include palm wine and *caña de caju* (cashew-flower rum). Beware homemade distilled products, which often contain high levels of toxins.

BISSAU

Despite ruined monuments, cavernous pot-holes and regular blackouts, Bissau has its charms. The sleepy, crumbling colonial heart boasts wide, mango-shaded streets, some attractive, pastel-coloured buildings, and lively cafés where the country's elite gather day after day. Best of all, there's a distinct absence of crime or hustle.

ORIENTATION

Bissau's main drag is the wide Ave Amílcar Cabral, running between the port and Praça dos Heróis Nacionais. On the northwestern edge of the town centre is the Mercado de

Bandim. From here, Ave de 14 Novembro leads northwest to the main *paragem* (bus and taxi park), the airport and all inland destinations.

INFORMATION

Cultural Centres

Centre Culturel Franco-Bissao-Guinéen

(☎ 206816; Praça Ché Guevera; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat)

This newly rebuilt centre has a library, art gallery, theatre and courtyard café.

Emergency

Fire (☎ 118)

Police (☎ 117)

Internet Access

Cybernet Café (Rua Vitorino Costa; per hr US\$1.40;

☎ 9am-10pm)

SITEC (Ave de 14 Novembro; per hr US\$3; ☎ until 10pm Mon-Sat, to 6pm Sun) Located outside the city centre, it has decent internet connections and air-con.

Medical Services

Pharmacie Moçambique (☎ 205513) Ask at this pharmacy to see Dr Kassem Dahrouge, who speaks French and some English.

Simão Mendes (☎ 212861; Ave Pansau Na Isna) Bissau's poor-quality main hospital.

Money

Banco da Africa Ocidental (BAO) near the port is the only bank that reliably exchanges cash (US dollars or, preferably, euros). There are many moneychangers around the Mercado Central. Most are honest, but beware of scammers.

Supermercado Mavegro (☎ 201224, 201216; Rua Eduardo Mondlane; ☎ 3.30-6pm Mon, 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat) Exchanges travellers cheques and cash, including US dollars.

Post

Main post office (Correio; Ave Amílcar Cabral; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat)

Travel Agencies

Guinetours (☎ 214344; Rua 12)

Surire Tours (☎ 214166; Rua de Angola)

SIGHTS

The **former presidential palace** dominates Praça dos Heróis Nacionais at the northern end of Ave Amílcar Cabral. With a bombed-out roof and shrapnel riddling its neoclassical

façade, it's a reminder of the country's fragile peace.

Off the southern end of Ave Amílcar Cabral are the narrow streets of the mango-shaded old Portuguese quarter. The neighbourhood is guarded by the **Fortaleza d'Amura**. Surrounded by imposing stone walls, it's still a military post and strictly off limits to visitors.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Bissau's **Carnival** is the country's biggest party. It takes place yearly in February or early March during the week leading up to Ash Wednesday. Music, masks, drinking and dancing are the order of the day.

SLEEPING

Accommodation in Bissau is expensive and generally of poor value.

Hotel Caracol (Ave Gaetano Semedo; r US\$20) This seedy place offering bucket water and a piece of foam on a cement floor is Bissau's only real budget option.

Pensão Central (☎ 213270; Ave Amílcar Cabral; r US\$40) Occupying a once-grand building in the town centre, Bissau's traditional backpacker choice now boasts thin mattresses and rather lax cleanliness and security.

Hotel Ta-Mar (☎ 206647; s without/with bath US\$50/70; ☎) Located in the old Portuguese quarter, this hotel boasts rickety fixtures and crumbling plaster, though it does have newish beds and air-conditioning.

Aparthotel Jordani (☎ 201719; Ave Pansau Na Isna; s/d US\$50/70; ☎) The friendly Jordani offers half-decent rooms with cold running water, air-conditioning, TV, small fridge and a generally dependable power supply.

Aparthotel Lobato (☎ 201719; Ave Pansau Na Isna; s/d US\$71/92; ☎) Rooms are newish and comfortable enough, though very stuffy; prices are high.

Residencial Coimbra (☎ 213467; fax 201490; Ave Amílcar Cabral; s/d US\$120/158; ☎) With comfortable, tasteful rooms, an attractive rooftop garden and a good breakfast buffet, this is Bissau's only genuinely decent choice.

EATING

For cheap eats, try the rice bars near the port (about US\$1 for a rice plate with meat or fish). Unless otherwise indicated, the following restaurants are open for lunch (around noon to 3pm) and dinner (around 7pm to 10pm) daily.

Restaurant Magui (Ave Amílcar Cabral; meals US\$5) The charming Magui serves spot-on Senegalese dishes in her simple eatery above the now-defunct cinema.

Restaurant Samaritana (off Ave Pansau Na Isna; meals US\$5) Simple but delicious Senegalese-inspired food in a humble roadside café.

Restaurant Ta-Mar (mains US\$8; ☎ 8am-9pm) Newly refurbished restaurant in the hotel of the same name (opposite) has a distinctly European feel, but often so-so food. Friday nights bring live music.

Restaurant Jordani (Ave Pansau Na Isna; mains US\$8-10) The largely Portuguese food can be disappointing, but it's a great spot on Thursday nights when top local musicians regularly perform.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

The most popular café is **Gelataria Baiana** (Praça Ché Guevara). French speakers may prefer the café in the **Centre Culturel Franco-Bissau-Guinéen** (☎ 206816; Praça Ché Guevara; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat). A number of restaurants also double as bar-cafés, including the **Restaurant Jordani** (Ave Pansau Na Isna) on Thursday and the **Restaurant Ta-Mar** (☎ 206647) on Friday.

X Club (Rua Osualdo Vieira) caters to everyone from idealistic UN workers to shady businessmen on the prowl. The décor is Euro-trendy and there are two free snooker tables.

SHOPPING

Centro Artístico Juvenil (Ave de 14 Novembro) With marked prices and no pressure to buy, this shop provides a fine introduction to the arts and crafts of Guinea-Bissau. Proceeds directly support young artisans.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bissau has the country's only airport with regularly scheduled flights, with services by TACV Cabo Verde Airlines, Air Sénégal, TAP Air Portugal and Air Luxor. See p381 for more information.

You can get bush taxis and minibuses to just about anywhere in the country, as well as to Senegal, at the outdoor *paragem*, hidden about 500m south of Ave de 14 Novembro, about 5km outside town. It's always best to get transport by 8am. For more information, see p381.

To get to the *paragem*, take a *toca-toca* (minibus) from the Mercado de Bandim (CFA100) or a taxi (about CFA1000) from anywhere in town.

GETTING AROUND

The airport is about 9km from the town centre. Taxis into town cost around US\$4. For a minibus (US\$0.20), walk 200m to the roundabout at the start of Ave de 14 Novembro.

Shared taxis – usually Mercedes, and always painted blue and white – are plentiful and ply all main routes. Prices vary according to distance and whim, but never cost more than US\$0.80 per person for trips within the town centre.

Small *toca-toca* (minibuses) painted blue and yellow serve major city routes (around US\$0.20), including a run from Mercado de Bandim up Ave de 14 Novembro to the *paragem* and airport.

ARQUIPÉLAGO DOS BIJAGÓS

With swaying palms, cooling breezes and powdery, white-sand beaches, the Bijagós islands exert a singular spell. Protected by swift tides and treacherous sandbanks, the island's largely matriarchal people eluded Portuguese control until the 1930s. Now the entire archipelago, including its rich marine life, has been declared a biosphere reserve, while two island groups form national parks.

Travellers should note that transport to and between the islands is difficult (see below). Also, low tides reveal kilometres-long mud flats, limiting beach going. Finally, telephone service – including mobile service – is unreliable.

Getting There & Away

Transport to the islands is difficult and/or expensive. *Canoas* – large, motorised and often leaky canoes – leave Bissau from Port Rampa, the fishermen's port near the Estádio 24 de Setembro. There are several Bissau-Bubaque *canoas* (US\$5 per person, four to six hours) that follow a regular weekly schedule, though departure times vary according to tides and winds. You can also ask around for unscheduled departures.

At the other extreme, higher-end fishing camps hire out speedboats at the cost of about US\$200 for a one-way trip from Bissau to Bubaque (up to eight people). The **Hotel Marazul** (☎ 6-626277) in Quinhámel has a range of boats and is the most likely option.

At the time of writing a small cruise ship called the *African Queen* was expected to return to Bissau, with regular, multiday excursions to the islands. Check with travel agencies in Bissau for the schedule and prices.

ILHA DE BUBAQUE

At the centre of the Bijagós, Bubaque is home to the archipelago's largest town, which serves as its major transport 'hub'. If you can't make it to remoter islands, Bubaque makes a comfortable place to unwind. There's a range of accommodation in and around the main town (also called Bubaque).

Sleeping & Eating

Most hotels serve meals if you order ahead. For cheap eats, head to the port area. Rooms in all of the following places have shared bathrooms with bucket shower.

Chez Titi (rUS\$10) Very basic rooms, but ideally perched on a small bluff just above the water.

Campement Cadjoco (rUS\$14) This French-run *pensão* (pension) offers good value, with decent rooms at the back of a pleasant garden. The owner also has a good, fast boat and organises fishing trips and transport.

Chez Dora (r US\$24) Chez Dora offers tasteful, impeccably maintained bungalows arranged around a lush garden. Meals (US\$6) are delicious amalgams of local ingredients – including the Portuguese owner's own pigs and papayas. Highly recommended.

Kasa Afrikana (☎ 821144; develayg@yahoo.fr; r US\$100; 🍷 🍷) The island's cushiest option has fully equipped rooms, attractive grounds with bar and pool, and water views.

Getting There & Away

For travel to/from Bissau, see left. There is also fairly regular service to Orango (US\$4, two to four hours) and occasional services to other islands.

ORANGO ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK

Home to rare saltwater species of hippo and crocodile, Ilha de Orango and the surrounding islands together make up the Orango Islands National Park. The island is also the burial site of the Bijagós kings and queens.

The island's only hotel, **Orango Parque Hotel** (☎ satellite phone 00871-761-273221; per person incl 3 meals CFA\$60), offers attractive, well-maintained bungalows right on the beach. The Italian-Portuguese owners also serve excellent food.

QUEENS OF THE BIJAGÓS

The peoples of the Arquipélago dos Bijagós have, over the centuries, developed a largely matriarchal culture quite distinct from that of mainland Guinea. Islanders are ruled by a king and queen (they're neither married nor even related) who serve as co-regents – the king managing men's affairs and the queen managing women's affairs. Women often serve as chiefs of individual villages, and they're also the sole homeowners – only fair since they are entirely responsible for homebuilding, from brick-making to actual construction.

See left for information about boat travel to the Bijagós.

JOÃO VIEIRA – POILÃO NATIONAL MARINE PARK

At the far, southwest end of the archipelago, João Vieira – Poilão National Marine Park consists of four islands and surrounding waters that together form a key nesting area for three species of endangered sea turtles. On idyllic Ilha João Vieira, **Chez Claude** (per person per night with full board US\$82) offers simple but spotless cabins and good Franco-African cuisine.

See left for information about boat travel to the Bijagós.

THE NORTHWEST

QUINHÁMEL

Located about 30km west of Bissau, Quinhámel serves as the capital of the Biombo region, traditional home of the Papel people. The town has a collective devoted to preserving traditional weaving techniques. There are no formal tours, but it's well worth a stop to see the men and boys at work on the traditional looms. Just outside town, **Hotel Marazul** (☎ 626277; s/d US\$61/72; 🍷 🍷) offers attractive bungalows and rents boats for fishing trips or transfers to the Bijagós islands.

PARQUE NATURAL DOS TARRAFES DO RIO CACHÊU

This national park is home to a diverse array of wildlife, including hippos, monkeys, manatees, panthers, gazelles and some 200 bird species.

The park office in the town of Cacheu offers rooms with shared bathroom with running water for US\$6 per person. Staff prepare meals and organise boat trips on the Cacheu and surrounding swamps (be prepared to bargain for both). For more information, contact the **IBAP office** (☎ 207106; Rua São Tomé) in Bissau.

SÃO DOMINGOS

São Domingos sits on the Senegalese border on the main route to/from Ziguinchor. If you get stuck here (not impossible as the border post is often closed at night), there are food stalls and several hotels around the main square. There are plenty of bush taxis to/from Bissau (US\$5.50, two to three hours).

Beware that cross-border violence regularly closes the border and makes travel unsafe. Check conditions before heading here or on to Varela.

VARELA

Varela is the favourite getaway of locals, with wide sand beaches as beautiful as those just across the border in Cap Skirring. At the time of writing the road from São Domingos was in terrible condition, though there was talk about repaving. Even with a good vehicle, the 50km drive can take several hours. Check ahead for security conditions around São Domingos.

Chez Helene (r US\$24) offers simple but well-maintained rooms and good meals (US\$5).

There is usually at least one minibus daily to/from São Domingos (two to three hours).

THE NORTHEAST

BAFATÁ

The birthplace of Amílcar Cabral and the country's second city, Bafatá retains a small but interesting colonial centre along the Gêba River.

Hotel Maimuna Capé (r with fan/air-con US\$24/34; ☎) offers comfortable, spotless rooms in an attractive building in the old colonial centre. The Portuguese-run **Restaurante Ponto de Encontro** (meals around US\$7) serves simple but hearty Portuguese food. There are also plenty of food stalls along the main Bissau–Gabú road.

Minibuses to Bissau (US\$3.50), Gabú (US\$1.40) or Buba (US\$1.60) depart from the petrol station area.

GABÚ

Lively if unattractive, Gabú offers a range of accommodation, making it a convenient stopover on your way to/from Guinea.

Hotel Visiom (☎ 511484; r with fan/air-con US\$16/30; ☎) offers clean rooms with bathroom, friendly staff and a small garden in a quiet spot in the north of town. In the town centre, **Residencial Djaraama** (☎ 511302; r without bathroom US\$25) is pricey but has some colonial character, including high ceilings and a wraparound veranda.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses go to Bissau regularly (US\$5, five to six hours). If you're heading for Guinea or Senegal, see p381 for transport options from Gabú. You can easily change CFA into Guinean francs at the bush taxi and minibus park.

THE SOUTH

BUBA

Buba is a small junction town. **Pousada Bela Vista** (☎ 6-647011; r US\$20; ☎) has spotless, attractively fitted-out bungalows and lovely vistas of the river. In town, there are a number of places to get cheap bowls of fish and rice (around US\$1). A minibus from Bissau (US\$5, approximately eight hours) leaves most mornings.

About 5km before you reach the town of Buba, you'll pass **Parque Natural do Lagoa de Cafatada**. While there was no infrastructure for visitors at the time of writing, it's an important habitat for bird and aquatic life. For more information, contact the **IBAP office** (☎ 207106; Rua São Tomé) in Bissau.

CATIÓ

Catió is the most remote area in the south that still has regular transport connections with Bissau – a necessary stop on the way to Jemberem and the Parque Natural de Cantanhez. You can reach Catió by minibus (US\$6, all day) from Bissau (though you may have to switch vehicles in Buba).

JEMBEREM & PARQUE NATURAL DE CANTANHEZ

A small village 22km east of Catió, Jemberem offers a community-based conservation scheme connected with the proposed **Cantanhez Forest**. The local women's association has set up the

small, inexpensive Raça Banana guesthouse. They can also arrange a guide (essential) for the nearby sacred forest, home to chimpanzees and elephants.

There's usually a daily *kandonga* (truck or pick-up) in the morning between Catió and Jemberem. For more information about the park, contact the **IBAP office** (☎ 207106; Rua São Tomé) in Bissau.

GUINEA-BISSAU DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation in Bissau is expensive and offers poor value (about US\$20 for primitive doubles and US\$70 for rather decrepit 'mid-range' digs). Outside the capital, the situation improves. A clean, decent room with electricity and running water might cost US\$25, or US\$35 with air-conditioning, while bucket water and a foam pad for two people costs US\$10 to \$15. Specialist hunting and fishing camps are scattered around the country, and generally cost US\$50 to US\$100 per person for room and full board.

ACTIVITIES

The Arquipélago dos Bijagós and Varela have great sandy beaches, and the waters around the Bijagós also offer some of the best deep-sea fishing in the world. Cycling is good, as roads are generally quiet, safe and flat. Bird-watching is extraordinary, especially along the coast.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks and government offices are generally open 8am to noon and 3pm to 6pm Monday to Friday, or 8am to 2pm Monday to Friday. Post offices are generally open mornings only from Monday to Friday, but the main branch in Bissau is open 8am to 6pm Monday to Saturday. Shops are generally open from 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday and 8am to 1pm Saturday. Some close for an hour or two in the early afternoon.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Guinea-Bissau Embassies & Consulates

In West Africa, you can get visas for Guinea-Bissau in The Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania and Senegal. For more details, see the relevant

PRACTICALITIES

- The national radio and TV stations broadcast in Portuguese. Most interesting for travellers is Radio Mavegro FM (100.0MHz), which combines music with hourly news bulletins in English from the BBC.
- Newspapers come and go quickly in Bissau. If you sit at one of the city's cafés or restaurants, a vendor will quickly offer you the latest options.
- Electricity supply is 220V and plugs are of the European two-round-pin variety.
- Guinea-Bissau uses the metric system.

country chapter. Outside Africa, Guinea-Bissau has very few embassies or consulates. These are more or less limited to the following:

Belgium (☎ 02 647 08 09; 70 Ave Franklin-Roosevelt, Brussels 1000)

France (☎ 01 45 26 18 51; 94 rue Saint Lazare, 75009 Paris)

Portugal (☎ 213 030 440; Rua Alcolena, 17, Lisbon 1400)

USA (☎ 301-947 3958; 15929 Yukon Lane, Rockville, MD 20855)

Embassies & Consulates in Guinea-Bissau

The following embassies are all located in Bissau. Opening hours listed are for visa applications.

France (☎ 201312; cnr Ave de 14 Novembro & Ave do Brazil)

Gambia (☎ 203928; Ave de 14 Novembro; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu, 8.30am-12.30pm Fri) Located 1km north-west of Mercado de Bandim.

Guinea (☎ 201231; Rua 12; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu, 8.30am-1pm Fri) East of the central stadium.

Mauritania (☎ 203696; Rua Eduardo Mondlane) South of the central stadium.

Senegal (☎ 212944; off Praça dos Heróis Nacionais; ☎ 8am-5pm)

The consul for the UK and the Netherlands is **Jan van Maanen** (☎ 201224, 211529; fax 201265; Supermercado Mavegro, Rua Eduardo Mondlane, Bissau). Contact the French embassy for information about visas for Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Bissau's **Carnival** (p375), which takes place in Bissau yearly in February or early March, is the country's biggest party, with music,

masks, dancing and parades. Small festivals are held in other towns around the country at about the same time, or after the autumn harvest (around November); check locally for dates.

HEALTH

A certificate with proof of a yellow fever-vaccination is required of all travellers.

HOLIDAYS

Guinea-Bissau celebrates the following public holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January

Anniversary of the Death of Amílcar Cabral 20

January

Women's Day 8 March

Easter March/April

Labour Day 1 May

Pidjiguiti Day 3 August

Independence Day 24 September

Christmas Day 25 December

Islamic feasts such as Eid al-Fitr (at the end of Ramadan) and Tabaski are also celebrated. For dates, see the Africa Directory (p1106).

INTERNET ACCESS

There is internet access only in Bissau. Internet cafés charge US\$2 to US\$3 per hour for slow, dial-up connections.

LANGUAGE

Portuguese is the official language, though the common tongue is Crioulo – a mix of medieval Portuguese and local words. Most ethnic groups also preserve their own language.

MONEY

At the time of writing there were no ATMs in Guinea-Bissau, and credit cards are not accepted anywhere. Euros are the easiest currency to exchange. US dollars are more difficult, especially outside Bissau.

The unit of currency is the West African CFA franc. The principal bank of Guinea-Bissau is the Banco da Africa Ocidental (BAO). For exchanging money in Bissau – the only place you can exchange travellers cheques – see p375.

Tipping is optional.

POST

The postal service is reliable but slow – you're probably better off mailing from Senegal or

Gambia. If you decide to risk it, airmail letters cost US\$0.90.

TELEPHONE

For local calls, look for '*posto publico*' signs in corner grocery stores and other shops around the country. They allow you to make local calls, and sometimes international long-distance calls, though the latter can be punishingly expensive – US\$5 to US\$10 per minute, depending on the country. There is also a call centre at the main post office (p375) in Bissau.

It is easy to buy a mobile phone with a prepaid plan. SIM cards are also readily available. At the time of writing Areeba had the best rates.

There are no telephone area codes in Guinea-Bissau. All fixed-line numbers have six digits while mobile phone numbers have seven digits.

VISAS

All visitors, except nationals of Economic Community of West Africa States (Ecowas) countries, need visas. These are normally valid for 45 days and are issued for around US\$60 at embassies. They are generally routinely issued at Bissau's airport, but not at land borders, so plan ahead. To avoid hassles, get one before you arrive.

Visa Extensions

Extensions are easy to obtain at **Serviço de Estrangeiros** (Ave 14 de Novembro, Bissau), behind the main immigration building across from the Mercado de Bandim. For virtually all nationalities, 45-day visa extensions cost around US\$8 and are ready the same day if you go early.

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas for the following neighbouring countries can be obtained at their embassies in Bissau. However, note that Gambian and Senegalese visas can generally be obtained without delay at land border crossings as well as at airports.

Gambia Three-month single-entry visas cost US\$30 and require one photo; they're ready the same day if you go early.

Guinea Two-month multiple-entry visas cost US\$40 plus two photos and take a day or two to issue.

Senegal One-month multiple-entry visas cost US\$10 plus four photos and are issued in two days.

TRANSPORT IN GUINEA-BISSAU

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Guinea-Bissau's only international airport is on the outskirts of Bissau.

TAP Air Portugal and Air Luxor are the only airlines with direct flights from Europe to Bissau. Between them, Air Sénégal and TACV Cabo Verde Airlines operate seven flights per week between Bissau and Dakar. To fly between Bissau and anywhere else in Africa, connect in Dakar (Senegal).

The following airlines service Guinea-Bissau:

Air Luxor (LK; ☎ 206422; www.airluxor.com; Ave 24 de Setembro) Hub: Lisbon.

Air Sénégal International (V7; ☎ 205211; www.air-senegal-international.com; Rua Osualdo Vieira) Hub: Dakar.

TACV Cabo Verde Airlines (VR; ☎ 206087; www.tacv.com; Ave Amílcar Cabral) Hub: Praia.

TAP Air Portugal (TP; ☎ 201359; www.flytap.com; Praça dos Heróis Nacionais) Hub: Lisbon.

DEPARTURE TAX

There is a US\$20 airport departure tax for international flights, which is usually included in your ticket.

Land

GUINEA

Bush taxis usually go to the border daily from Gabú and Koundara (US\$5). It can take all day to cover this 100km stretch. A less-travelled route, open only in the dry season, links southeastern Guinea-Bissau and western Guinea via Quebo and Boké.

SENEGAL

Most overland travel between Senegal and Guinea-Bissau passes through Ziguinchor and the Guinean border town of São Domingos, though the border regularly closes due to government clashes with Cassamance separatists.

Check safety conditions carefully. A bush taxi between Bissau and Ziguinchor costs US\$9.50 per person.

You can also cross the border between Farim and Tanaf by (slow-going) bush taxi. You may also be able to get transport from Gabú to Tambacounda (via Vélingara), though road conditions are poor and journeys long.

GETTING AROUND

Air

At the time of writing there was no domestic air service.

Bicycle

Largely flat and with little traffic or crime problems, biking is a great way to get around Guinea-Bissau. There are no formal bike rentals, but asking around will usually yield results quickly.

Boat

Canoas connect Bissau with the Bijagós, with regularly scheduled boats to Bubaque and Bolama and occasional boats to other islands. See p376 for more information about travel to the Bijagós.

Car & Motorcycle

Main roads between Bissau and Bafatá, Gabú and Ziguinchor are all in decent condition. However, all other roads are seriously degraded and often impassable without 4WD – especially during the rainy season.

Minibus & Bush Taxi

The main roads between Bissau and the towns of Bafatá, Gabú and São Domingos are all paved and at the time of writing in good condition. Public transport consists mainly of minibuses (almost always painted blue and yellow) and Peugeot 504 bush taxis, often called *sept-places* (seven-seaters). *Kandongas* (shared pick-up trucks) ply rural routes. Mornings (before 8am) are always the best time to get transport. Fares from Bissau to Gabú (around 200km) are US\$5.50 by Peugeot 504, US\$4 by minibus and US\$3 by *kandonga*.

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